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AUTHOR Shuster, Pamela Reed
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ABSTRACT

Despite reforms that argue for parental participation in schools, little is known about parents' and teachers' views on curriculum issues. This paper presents findings of a case study of a suburban high school that identified parents' perceptions of what constitutes the "ideal" English curriculum for today's high school seniors, and compared parents' views with those of their children's teachers. Data were gathered through interviews with 24 parents of high school seniors and all 13 English faculty members at a high school located in a middle-class suburb in a northeastern city. The case study shows that teachers and parents hold conflicting views on curriculum goals, content, and teaching methods for the English curriculum, but that the lack of communication about these issues led to both a climate of suspicion and a lack of parental support for teachers' efforts in the classroom. Lack of a deliberative process also kept teachers and community members stymied about how to institute educational change. It is recommended that educators initiate a dialogue between parents and teachers, that teachers address their profession's lack of knowledge about the effects of various instructional practices and address criticisms directly, and that parents take an active role in disseminating information. The appendix includes three English curriculum scenarios. (Contains 21 references). (LMI)

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CURRICULUM IN CONFLICT: THE NEED FOR DIALOGUE

Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association

Chicago, Illinois

Symposium: "What Do Secondary School Parents Have to Offer Curriculum Professionals?"

March 24, 1997

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Pamela Reed Shufro
Arlington Public Schools
Arlington, MA 02174
ppshufro@compuserve.com

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ABSTRACT

Despite reforms which argue for parental participation in schools, little is known about parents' and teachers' views on curriculum issues. This case study of a suburban high school shows that teachers and parents hold conflicting views on curriculum goals, content and teaching methods for the English curriculum, but that the lack of communication about these issues led to both a climate of suspicion and a lack of parental support for teachers' efforts in the classroom. Lack of a deliberative process also kept teachers and community members skeptical about how to institute educational change.

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While many educators have been disturbed by poor reviews of their efforts in the press, they may take consolation from reports that parents grade their local schools more highly than they do those of the nation at large (Elam, Rose and Gallup, 1994). However, communication between parents and educators on substantive matters, such as curriculum, has generally been lacking, suggesting that parental "support" is superficial. A recent report from the Public Agenda (Johnson, 1995), in fact, draws sharp contrast between the views of parents and teachers on many curriculum issues. This divergence can affect both teacher morale and student achievement. Researchers have found, for example, that teachers' morale and feelings of efficacy are associated with a congruence between their values and those of the parents of children they teach (Hemmings and Metz, 1990) and that teachers feel that they can more easily meet parental expectations in homogeneous communities (Louis, 1990). Other researchers have inferred that school effectiveness is related to a context of shared values among parents, drawing distinctions between Catholic schools and public schools in this regard (Bryk et al., 1993; Coleman and Hoffer, 1987; Hill, Foster and Gendler, 1990).

There has been, however, a movement for public schools to arrive at a consensus on educational goals, often involving community members as well as teachers and administrators. This impetus arises from both theoretical considerations of the meaning of community in a diverse democratic society (see e.g. Dewey, 1919; Bellah, 1985; Strike, 1993) and recent implementation of school restructuring efforts in a variety of communities (Fullan, 1991; Lane and Epps, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1994).

If it is true that consensus about the values and goals of schools leads to better workplaces for teachers and students as well as greater achievement for students, then it is crucial for schools to begin to forge shared goals. Yet few schools have begun the attempt to bridge the communication gap between parents and teachers about curriculum goals. This case study attempts to do just that. Part of a longer investigation of the social context of high school English (Shufro, 1995), it attempts to discern parents' perceptions of what constitutes the "ideal" English curriculum for today's high school seniors and to compare their views with those of their children's teachers. It also attempted to determine just what role both parents and teachers believed was appropriate for parents to play in educational decision-making.

Methods

This paper reports on a study of 24 parents of high school seniors and all 10 members of the English department of a high school (called Hillside, a pseudonym) located in a middle-class suburb of a northeastern city. The research design was constructed according to the interactive model conceptualized by Maxwell (1996). Parent participants were randomly selected from class lists provided by the school, with equal numbers chosen from students enrolled in honors, regular college prep and general track English classes. All participants were guaranteed anonymity, and all names presented in this paper are pseudonyms.

The semi-structured interviews focused on parents' and teachers' perceptions of the existing English curriculum and teaching methods, their views on an "ideal" English

curriculum, and their views on parental roles regarding education. Interviews were tape recorded in all but three cases, and were conducted, in the case of teachers, at school, and, in the case of parents, in the homes of all but two participants, who chose to be interviewed in the public library. Interviews lasted from 45 minutes to more than three hours in length, with the longer interviews conducted over two or three separate sessions. All interviews were transcribed, resulting in approximately 800 pages of single-spaced typed trancripts. Transcripts were then coded and analyzed, and along with classs observations and documents, constituted the body of data on which this study was based.

Hillside residents are nearly all Caucasian, and, as a result, the racial composition of the high school was nearly all white as well. Occupations of parents interviewed included, among mothers, clerical, medical, sales and restaurant workers. Four mothers were teachers, although only two were employed as teachers during the time of the study. Several fathers were employed as sales representatives, supervisors and managers in business or in government. Several were technicians in manufacturing and medical sectors, several were business owners. A few held professional positions in business, engineering and medicine.

Educational levels of parents were associated with the track-level placement of their children, with a majority of parents of honors students college graduates, approximately one-third of parents of regular college prep students holders of college degrees, and no parents of general class students degree recipients. Many parents, however, had received post-secondary training at secretarial schools, technical schools, at hospitals or in junior colleges.

Results

Results indicate that teachers valued a traditional English curriculum, rationalizing a study of the literary heritage and formal composition on their belief in the importance of the liberal arts tradition as an end in itself and as preparation for college. Teachers struggled to define a curriculum for the general English classes, attempting to provide a curriculum that would meet the needs of less-skilled and often reluctant students. Teachers suggested that an "ideal" English curriculum would look very much like the existing one, but they deemed it appropriate for far fewer students than were currently enrolled in college prep and honors classes.

Parents, however, expressed their preference for a practically oriented curriculum which meets their instrumental goals of college or workplace success for their children. Rather than focus on literature, parents prefer that teachers emphasize communications skills. At the same time, parents put a premium on enjoyable activities which hold their children's interest.

Teachers were wary of an increased role for parents in decision-making about curriculum, believing that there was a clash of values between teachers and parents and viewing themselves as experts in curriculum matters. Parents also viewed teachers as experts, and they showed little inclination to participate in curriculum decisions. When both groups, however, were presented with a variety of ways for parents to participate in setting curriculum goals, they were amenable to some form of parental participation.

The Curriculum

English courses at Hillside are organized into three levels, honors, college preparatory, and general. For students who are enrolled in the "top" two levels, the existing English curriculum content at Hillside is similar to that in use for several decades in American secondary schools (Applebee, 1974, 1981, 1990). Literature study focuses on classic works from the literary canon presented according to genre or historic period, primarily contained in anthologies, but supplemented with paperback novels and the occasional photocopied story or poem. Composition instruction emphasizes literary essays, and teachers teach the five-paragraph essay as the basic organizational structure. Although teachers are aware of alternative methodologies, such as the process approach to writing and cooperative learning, most teachers describe their approach to teaching as "direct instruction." Mr. Boggs described a typical college preparatory English class this way:

> I collected some work that was due today involving the term paper. While I was doing that I took attendance. Then I asked them to open their books and we read the poem [Keats' "When I Have Fears..."] aloud. I asked a few questions about what kind of a poem it was and it was a sonnet. We went over the characteristics of a sonnet. They went through the poem in units of stanzas to find out the main idea of each of them. There are four quatrains, and a couplet at the end. I asked questions. What do you think that means? What do those four lines mean taken together? We talked about that for about fifteen minutes and then we went to "Ode on a Grecian Urn," which is one of the great poems in the English language and a great one to discuss. And I did a lot of that. We read a little bit and I did some Socratic questioning--what do you think it means?--and I called on one kid who is doing a term paper on Keats to bring in some of his expertise on Keats' life. We talked on specific lines which are particularly thoughtful and thought-provoking and some which are particularly beautiful in the use of language--and what do you think that means, what is he trying to describe here? What exactly is an ode and why is he trying to celebrate this [object]? And we finally talked about the last line where he talks about beauty is truth and truth beauty, and I kind of left then with

> that. Well, why don't you give that some thought, what do you think that might mean, and we'll talk about that later. That was pretty much it.

Boggs himself describes this as "typical teacher-centered whole-class participation." He contrast this with a pedagogical technique used in student-centered classes.

> There's a lot of talk about cooperative learning. I think the attitude here is that that's a method that is used in certain situations but not the bread and butter of the class. Most of us feel uncomfortable doing that day in and day out.

This approach to the conduct of an honors or college prep literature class is typical at Hillside, but there is an alternative approach. Beckwith, who, as department head, is responsible for introducing alternative methods into the curriculum, has attempted to create a student-centered environment in his classroom. He prefers that students grapple with literature as a way of learning to use their minds. Rather than lead a "discussion" by posing questions which direct students to a particular reading of a literary work, he asks students to pose their own questions, hypothesize several answers, and eventually form a judgment. Rather than search for a single meaning, however, he asks students to revisit a text to examine it from different perspectives.

> [R]ead a short story and then take the first ten minutes after the short story to put down their first thoughts, collect their first thoughts. Then, usually there is the second half of that which is that, having done that, then go back to the story and do something else, go in and put an X in the margin next to any place where they have a question. Or to go back and assume they have been cast as movie director and they have to get a props list and list all of the things that the props director is going to have to get hold of...something that is going to make them go back and skim or scan the text from another angle...[W]hat I am trying to get at is...seeing the value of different kinds of readings and multiple readings from multiple perspectives.

Similarly, there are two "camps" in the department over approaches to the teaching of writing. A good example of the traditional approach is that advocated by Mr. Reilly, who endorses teaching the five-paragraph essay. He feels that this approach helps students organize their ideas in a logical, coherent manner.

> We have generally a five-paragraph essay. You have a general statement leading into a thesis, a concession, three full paragraphs, then a concluding paragraph.

At Hillside, the five-paragraph essay is considered the nuts-and-bolts of the writing curriculum, teachers rationalizing that it fosters the logical writing that college teachers demand. A focus on preparation for college writing also motivates the teaching of the research paper.

All teachers at Hillside expect students to write "correctly." Several suggest that correct writing should most appropriately be taught in elementary or junior high school, and the fact that students at all curriculum levels have deficiencies in this area is troubling to many teachers. Many supplement the *Warriner's* exercises with teacher-made worksheets, but teachers differ in the amount of time they spend teaching grammar and mechanics.

Several teachers voiced a lack of confidence in their ability to teach "correctness" to all students, citing examples of students who did not master apostrophes or correct spelling despite repeated teaching. Even Farley, the in-house grammarian, who enjoyed teaching grammar and took some pride in his methods, said that he was not able to ensure mastery of grammar concepts by all students. Instead, he indicated non-mastery by giving students below-average grades.

Department members have not reached a consensus on their approach to grammar and composition, and they refer to an ongoing "debate" about the issues. As with literature instruction, Beckwith has attempted to steer the staff toward composition methods which are more in tune with the student-centered approach to teaching that he advocates, and for this reason he has urged department members to adopt the process method. He suggests that students learn by immersion in writing activities because they invest much more of themselves when they care about what they are doing. Since he wants to foster student engagement and independence, he encourages spontaneous, expressive forms of composition, focusing on structure and mechanics only at the editing and proofreading stages of writing. Only one other member of the department, Mr. Hoffman, who teachers a writing elective, employs this "process" approach.

The General Class

The curriculum for general-class English is much less clearly defined than that of college prep and honors classes, and, although the Hillside curriculum guide suggests that the content is individualized to meet students' needs, most teachers used the same teacher-directed, whole-class format that they used for the upper levels. Teachers candidly admitted that students in general classes were difficult to teach and that they were not always sure what would "work," but they indicated that they were given "a free hand" to devise a curriculum based on their own preferences. Thus, the content of the general track English classes varied considerably depending on the teacher.

The immediate problem for the general literature class is seen as the limited verbal ability of many general students. Teachers questioned the nature of the school subject "literature" in the general class. As Mr. Hoffman lamented

> It is not so much that you are teaching literature to the generals as you are reading literature and finding out what you read to make sure what you read is conistent from student to student. And if it is not consistent, is it a question of interpretation or a question of misunderstanding? So, you are not so much teaching literature as you are teaching reading.

What Hoffman calls "reading," however, becomes questioning and then explaining, or, perhaps, line-by-line explication of what teachers normally expect students in upper level classes to read independently.

Compounding the problem of poor reading ability is the problem of student engagement. Even competent readers in the general classes may not actually do their homework, many lacking motivation, simply biding time until graduation. Some teachers devise a curriculum based on student preferences, varying the demands of reading and writing according to what will engage the majority. According to Mr. Marino:

> I have had classes that like to read, that maybe hate to write, they hate to deal with grammar, things like that, so I do almost everything with reading...The same is true of classes that like to write. I've got a class right now, a general class that likes to sit and write, and so that's what I will do. If I want to do, for example, *Romeo and Juliet*, I will show them the movie, which they like. So instead of talking about it in terms of what they have read or seen, I will ask a question and... give them a paper and, you know, write down some ideas.

To avoid student resistance, some teachers organize class instruction in such a way as to minimize direction by the teacher. Mr. Lamont, for example, gives his students free choice of reading and writing assignments, alternating reading days with writing days,

collecting work and grading students largely on the amount of work completed. This keeps students engaged and enables most students to pass the class by doing activities which are ostensibly the purview of English class--reading and writing. Even Beckwith, the department head, suggests that teachers' usual goals for teaching literature and writing are too ambitious for general students. He feels that there can be " a real tug of war" between the energy teachers put forth and the inertia of student resistance. Individualized assignments can be a way of "getting out from underneath that thing...which is to struggle over turf." He also suggests that teachers focus on more immediate, "realistic" goals for general students, those related to interpersonal skills and career readiness.

Teachers' Views of the "Ideal" Curriculum

Teachers, at first, indicated their general satisfaction with the current English curriculum, suggesting few modifications when they were asked how they might design an "ideal' curriculum. Several felt that "the basics" could be strengthened by requiring "more" reading. Three teachers favored an emphasis on the teaching of grammar, but one teacher favored less grammar. Four teachers believed that the curriculum itself was appropriate at each level but that students were unprepared or unmotivated to succeed in the curriculum level they chose. They complained that many students who were enrolled in college prep classes were incapable of doing the work and that the range of ability in general classes was too wide, so they favored more carefully delineated enrollment criteria. Two other teachers replied that there was, in fact, no "ideal" curriculum.

When teachers were pressed to feel completely unconstrained in formulating their replies, teachers began to advance several significant curriculum alterations. Their suggestions, however, were idiosyncratic. One teacher, for example, suggested a system of elective courses in English for juniors and seniors, on such varied topics as Shakespeare, satire, writing, and vocabulary development. Another teacher suggested an interdisciplinary humanities curriculum. One teacher thought that the literary heritage curriculum currently in place for college prep and honors students might be extended to the general classes if a more visual approach, using films and small group discussions, were tried. Another teacher concurred with the idea of raising expectations for general students with a "substantive, intellectual" and "skill-oriented" curriculum.

Several teachers wanted to restructure the school day, but for different reasons. One teacher felt that students should be given more time for silent reading, extending the school day if necessary, because "reading has got to become more of a way of life if they are going to achieve in writing." Another teacher felt that restructuring would be necessary to bring class size down to a level which would enable teachers to personalize education.

> The only ideal I would have is just having fewer kids. It's not exactly what I am going to be teaching...a lot of times I just feel a sense of frustration because I don't have the time to give to certain kids who need it more than others.

A few teachers used metaphors which suggested almost total frustration with the existing curriculum. Beckwith said, "I would dump it." Reilly wanted to "burn the system to the ground because I don't think that it is working." Their proposed solutions,

however, were different. Beckwith proposed a curriculum "heavily oriented toward thinking skills" with "more freedom" of curriculum content. Reilly, however, would place a greater share of the educational burden on parents, saying "Somehow we have got to get the accountability factor of the homes back into the school system." Accountability for parents would entail their enforcing compliance with teachers' assignments.

> One of the things that I think you need to do, you need to create things such as summer reading programs, mandatory, where you are getting parental support. For kids, sorry, I know it's your vacation, but you need to read

Both Reilly and another teacher, Mr. Hoffman, believed that the only way to deal with the lack of seriousness from many college prep and general students would be to institute a two-tiered system, with academic courses for those students who are truly "college material" and practical and vocational courses for those students who are not interested in academic studies. To Hoffman, the "ideal" curriculum could exist only in a private school.

> I often daydream about leaving public school and opening my own private school. Work with people who wanted to learn, and you could select and you could dismiss. One of the big problems [in public schools] is you can't dismiss anyone. Unless the kids is physically endangering other people, he stays in school no matter what, and that's wrong.

Curriculum Scenarios

Teachers were also asked for their comments on written scenarios depicting three kinds of high school English curricula (see Appendix). The first described a traditional literary heritage curriculum in which students studied "classics" and wrote literary essays. The second described a student-centered curriculum which included works by contemporary authors, often chosen by the students themselves, and which stressed

expressive writing along with formal essays. The third scenario described a curriculum which emphasized the "basic skills" of reading and writing and which included magazines and newspapers along with classic and contemporary literature. Writing, according to this scenario, would be practical in nature, focusing on both school-based genres and types of writing used in the workplace.

Teachers identified the content described in the literary heritage scenario as the predominant curriculum model used by Hillside teachers for honors and college prep classes. They were not asked, however, whether they would choose any of the three scenarios as an "ideal" English curriculum. Rather, their comments on the "ideal" curriculum were elicited from the open-ended questions described above. Some teachers, however, did indicate that certain aspects of the scenarios were *not* ideal. Groupwork or cooperative learning was one method that had limited appeal. The concept of "mastery" was another. Since teachers emphasized the teaching of literature, where goals are diffuse, they did not think of themselves as aiming for mastery. As Mr. Hoffman remarked, "What intrigues me is, first of all, sometimes I don't know what I am teaching, and by that I mean I don't know what it is the kids are getting." Teachers felt that reteaching a concept until students have attained a criterion would be ideal, but difficult as a practical matter. Teachers cited examples of how many students did not learn grammar, punctutation and spelling despite lessons and corrections on students papers, saying that they did not really know how to ensure that students learn such skills.

Teachers' Views of What Parents Want

Although teachers expressed a general feeling of support from the community, citing primarily attendance at back-to-school nights and other school functions as well as the general absence of complaints, they expressed a nagging feeling that support is superficial. Several teachers expressed the belief that parents are not so much interested in education as they are interested in their children's financial success once they leave school. Teachers cited several examples to support their contention that parents value the credentialing function of schools far more than they do the educative function: the pressure to prepare students for the SAT, the action parents took to change the weighting of examinations in determining final grades, and actions by parents of Advanced Placement students to modify the grade-point weighting of the AP classes.

Teachers' remarks suggest that there is a perception of a profound clash of values between parents and teachers. Teachers see themselves as guardians of the liberal arts in a society which values wealth and status. By becoming teachers, they have demonstrated that they eschew financial success for more intangible rewards, and it is natural for them to feel some resentment toward parents who seem to choose otherwise. As Farley remarked: "I come out of a liberal arts background, and I am convinced that education has purposes that transcend the financial." Several teachers are so fond of the arts that they look for ways to promote interest in the arts among their students, such as playing classical music during homeroom. Hoffman was explicit about his reason for doing so: "Some kids have never heard serious music or what I call good music...If the parents aren't interested, they are not likely to be exposed to it." He and other teachers expressed the belief that families

are more likely to watch television than read, and so they feel parents' actions actually undermine the values which teachers attempt to instill.

Parents' Views on the English Curriculum

With only one exception, parents of children in all groups, honors, college prep and general, perceived schooling in instrumental terms. Many parents spoke of the importance of preparing for college, and others spoke of preparation for the workplace.

The aspect of English which was deemed most relevant in instrumental terms was writing. Mrs. Davis, a parent who had been critical of the writing program at Hillside, was particularly concerned because she felt that writing would be crucial to her daughter's success. While she herself had not worked outside the home after leaving college, she cited her husband's career as evidence that written communication skills are important in the business world. She envisioned her daughter attending business school or law school and felt that writing was the most most important aspect of English for her daughter.

Mrs. Bergman attested to the importance of writing skills by comparing her own strong background in writing to that of her husband:

> He was in the kind of high school that was doing a lot of experimenting and he read lots of different kinds of literature. It's not that that was bad...It took him a long time as a professional in his field. You have to do a fair amount of writing, science and lab reports...proposals. He had to learn on the job from superiors...Maybe [the experimental program helped] kids that have some natural writing abilities, natural affinities for vocabulary...He was much more of a math-science head. In all honesty, he lost those few years of basics and certainly his writing skills as an adult in his early professional years suffered because of it.

Mrs. Donlan, a parent, who had gone into secretarial work after high school, also felt that she had not been adequately prepared in terms of writing even though she had been a good student and had won high honors in commercial courses and in history.

> If one of my bosses ever said to me, write a letter for me, with large words and all, I could have had trouble, but luckily I didn't have to do that, so I just lucked out.

Besides the usefulness of writing as preparation for work, many parents mentioned that they hoped their children would learn to speak better as a result of studying English, and several were disappointed that speaking, other than informal class discussion, was not a more integral part or the English curriculum. Mrs. Field remarked that she wanted her daughter to "learn how to say 'she and I' and conversational English if nothing else." One mother contrasted the speech of her more successful child to that of a son who had not finished high school. She felt that the speech of the soon-to-be graduate was better, inferring that it was English that "put the polish on it." Mr. Vargas felt that education provided a kind of refinement. He said that many young men in his business do not know how to speak to the public: "They act like they're wise guys." Another parent felt a personal indadequacy in her job as a computer training consultant: "I wish I had words to say what I want to say...not necessarily in writing, but being able to speak to people."

This emphasis on the importance of speaking suggests that those parents who mentioned the importance of studying "grammar" may very well have meant "correct speech" when they used this term or, perhaps, more sophisticated vocabulary and syntax. Teachers, of course, often use the term "grammar" to refer to technical analysis of

language, such as identifying parts of speech. Mrs. Cormier, however, indicated that the technical aspects of language study were less important to her than their direct application. "I would emphasize speaking skills or writing skills rather than the child knowing what a gerund phrase is." Another mother, referring to grammar, said, "I don't mean punctuation and commas, more speaking ability and putting things together. Grammar to me is the spoken word."

Along with the importance of communications skills, a few parents, chiefly parents of children in general classes, mentioned affective goals as an important aspect of the English curriculum. One mother hoped her daughter would achieve a feeling of self-confidence, another emphasized the importance of a sense of values, and two parents mentioned learning responsibility and self-discipline.

Although the study of literature is a major part of the curriculum at Hillside and at most American high schools, literature was not prominent in parents' discussions of the English curriculum. Only one parent, herself a former teacher and college English major, extolled the importance of literature even though she perceived it to have little utilitarian value. Even parents who supported "reading" often disparaged "literature." One father, the parent of a daughter with a learning disability, was disturbed by the teaching of Shakespeare.

> She brought a book home that they had to read and write a report on, and it was--*Macbeth*! *I* had trouble with it. She says, is this gonna give me a job? Are they gonna ask me questions that are in this book? And she's right. She says they're making me read something that means nothing in my life.

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Several parents drew a contrast between literature and "the basics" in very explicit terms, such as Mr. Vargas: "What I believe is math, spelling, reading and writing. I don't care about literature, I don't care about history. Sure, fine, but it's not like an everyday thing."

While parents could not justify the study of literature in vocational terms, some parents did feel knowledge of literature might be useful in other ways. These parents discussed English in terms which suggested that they thought the subject might help their children advance in social status. While there was no great commitment to in-depth study of literature, a few parents thought that being "exposed to" famous literary works would enable their children to become "well-educated persons." As Mrs. Field remarked, "[T]hey're part of our culture and even if you just go to a cocktail party, these kind of things always seem to come up."

Parents' Views on the "Ideal" Curriculum

Parents were queried about the "ideal" curriculum in two ways, first by asking open-ended questions and, second, by presenting them with the same curriculum scenarios shown to Hillside teachers. The findings indicate that parents' preferences differ considerably from the current Hillside curriculum.

To the open-ended question about what should be included in the "ideal" curriculum, a few parents replied with vague answers, such as "all of it," but most parents mentioned specific aspects of the curriculum, most often responding with some mention of "the basics." The most popular response was "reading" and its variants, followed closely

by "writing." "Grammar" was mentioned by more than a third of respondents, "speaking" or "correct speech" by one-fourth, and "vocabulary" and "spelling" mentioned by a few others. Specific topics mentioned included outlining and note-taking. One-fourth mentioned "literature" or "classics," while several parents indicated that they valued the reading of works which were not necessarily considered classics. Obviously there is overlap in the categories listed above, but it seems clear that "reading" and "writing" are considered staples of the "ideal' English curriculum. What is perhaps most striking is that most parents mentioned the development of skills as constituting the most appropriate content of high school English rather than content related to the learning of a body of knowledge. These concerns reaffirm parents' view, expressed above, that high school English should have practical value.

Parents were also queried about what methods they would like English teachers to use in the classroom. The answers, interestingly, revealed that parents' preferences fell into two camps, those, actually fewer in number, who emphasized structure and discipline, and the majority, who preferred an "interesting" teacher who "encouraged" students. Mr Donlan was a particularly outspoken proponent of discipline:

> I'm of the firm opinion that it's a rare duck in high school that without pushing or some sort of persuasion is going to sit down and for the fun of it is going to study their heart out. My son, I have to say, "Hey, you're not going out tonight."...And if I didn't do that, I'm telling you right here and now Tim wouldn't have done [homework], there's no doubt in my mind.

Several other parents wanted teachers to uphold "higher standards" and, especially, assign "more work."

There was no indication, however, that parents looked primarily to the past as model for current teaching practices. In fact, several parents indicated that they did not approve of the fear tactics that some of their own teachers had relied on to ensure student compliance with rules. Parents were particularly attuned to their children's affective needs. They preferred teachers who were "encouraging," "not too quick to criticize," and who were "interested in them personally." Parents who cited examples of teachers taking a personal interest in students, staying after school for extra help or calling parents about concerns were particularly pleased. Parents favored a relaxed classroom atmosphere in which students felt comfortable to express their own opinions. As one parent put it, "These are high school kids, they don't need college professors yet...I don't think fear should enter into learning." Humor was mentioned by several parents. "If there's a teacher that jokes, makes the atmosphere pleasant, I think kids will listen more." Not all the burden, however, was placed on the teacher. Parents felt that students would be more involved if they had a chance to actively participate in class, as they felt that students were turned off by teachers who were "always lecturing."

Parents' Views on the Curriculum Scenarios

Parents' choices of the scenarios corroborate their responses to the open-ended questions. The majority favored the mastery curriculum (Scenario 3), with its emphasis on communications skills, as their first choice. Second in popularity was the student-centered model, which was chosen by six parents, although two of these parents chose it in conjunction with another choice in a "tie" vote. Only four parents chose the literary

heritage model as first choice, and one of these votes was tied for first-place with the student-centered model

The mastery curriculum appealed to parents of students at all curriculum levels Half of the parents of honors students chose it as the favored curriculum The mastery curriculum was most popular with parents of students in the college prep classes Seven of these parents chose it (one in a tie with the student-centered model) The mastery curriculum was also favored by parents of general students, although by a slimmer margin

Parents' comments on the various curricula provide explanations for their choices Parents spoke favorably of the practical aspects of the mastery curriculum, especially the fact that the content included memos and business letters They also expressed the belief that reading newspapers and magazines would be interesting to students and relevant to adult life Parents also liked the techniques of testing and reteaching, if necessary, key components of the curriculum As a parent of an honors student put it "Some fundamentals have been missing, and that's important too The kids maybe aren't tested to assess where they are " Negative comments that were made about the mastery curriculum were that it was more suited to elementary or middle school, some felt that it was appropriate for students who were considered "lower level" than their own children

Parents expressed both favorable and unfavorable views about the student-centered curriculum model The aspect which troubled some parents was the emphasis on small group discussion and peer evaluation of written compositions Some parents felt that their children were too shy to work comfortably with peers or too easily intimidated

by academically more competent students. One parent, on the other hand, felt that her son would be *too* comfortable in the small group, insufficiently challenged.

Several parents, however, responded favorably to small group activities. They felt that the opportunity to work with peers capitalized on adolescents' preoccupation with social matters. One mother who worked in a medical facility where peer reviews were conducted commented that peer evaluation was an especially useful aspect of the model.

Parents also liked the content of the student-centered model. They approved of student choice of reading material and the inclusion of contemporary literature along with the classics. One parent who, at first , leaned toward the literary heritage model, later added the student-centered curriculum as a first-choice "tie" because of the inclusion of modern literature.

As mentioned above, the literary heritage curriculum was identified by teachers as the curriculum in place at Hillside, but it received few endorsements from parents. Only four of the 24 respondents chose it as the preferred curriculum. Ironically, two of the four parents who favored it were parents of students in general classes, the content of which most deviated from the literary heritage model. Parents of children in college prep and honors classes, however, quite knowledgeable about their children's struggle with and distaste for the "classics," clearly preferred an alternative.

Who Should Decide?

Teachers do not welcome parental involvement in school decisions. The questions regarding parents' roles were asked in two ways. The first was, "Who do you think

should be responsible for setting educational goals in schools?" Eight of ten teachers specifically mentioned "teachers," with five of these including parents as contributors. Three teachers, however, answered that parents should be *excluded* from the goal-setting process. Only one teacher answered "parents" unequivocally as the one group which should be responsible for setting goals.

Teachers believe that they, of course, are the experts in school matters. But teachers also cite specific examples which show how parents often act inappropriately on behalf of their children. According to teachers, the most obvious example is that parents have a propensity to overestimate a child's ability. Teachers make recommendations for placement into the various curriculum levels, but many parents override these recommendations. Although the school does not advertise the possibility of the override and although many parents do not know it exists, according to teachers, the college preparatory and honors classes are oversubscribed with students who do not "belong."

Since teachers view themselves as "experts" in the education of young people, many consider it an affront that some parents might wish to participate in setting goals or helping to determine teaching content. Boggs compared teachers to medical professionals:

> I am a little leery of community involvement, and only because I feel you don't have community involvement in setting the goals of a hospital. I don't mind the parent questioning whether I did the appendicitis [surgery] correctly or not, or how I am going to do the appendicitis, but I really don't want them in the operating room telling me, you know, cut over here and cut over there. I think that I am a professional just like a doctor is a professional and you can get a second opinion and you can choose another doctor, but I think that by and large, you don't tell the doctor how to do the operation.

Yet teachers did display a willingness for parents to play some role in setting educational policy. When I asked how parents might become involved in determining curriculum goals, most teachers expressed the view that it would be appropriate for parents to participate on a committee with teachers to discuss curriculum content. Some teachers thought parents might answer questionnaires in order to provide input to teachers. A few felt that there might be a meeting held to solicit parental comments on curriculum matters.

Parents were initially stymied when given the opportunity to imagine ways parents might participate more fully in determining curriculum goals. Only three parents of all those interviewed responded with a suggestion for some sort of collective action. One suggested lobbying the School Committee, one suggested joining the PTA, and the third indicated that parents "well-versed in that particular area" might participate on a curriculum committee. Several parents gave weak acquiescence to the idea of parental participation saying, "In a way I do," or "If they feel strongly," while still others replied that it was "up to the educators" to decide curriculum goals.

However, when offered examples of possible avenues for participation, parents did express some desire for input. Ten parents expressed the belief that serving on committees would be an appropriate means for parental participation. The majority (13) felt that answering questionnaires about curriculum issues was appropriate. Only three parents felt the current practice of choosing from an array of courses described in a course selection booklet was an adequate means for parental involvement. Thus, there was a general feeling that the current system was inadequate yet no evidence of trust that direct

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collective involvement would impro0ve upon the present system. Many were fearful of the climate of conflict that would erupt as interests and values were contested. As one parents said, "There is no answer, as far as I am concerned, because somebody is not going to be happy."

There are several reasons why parental participation has been limited. First, parents believe that, while they may have complaints, they are relatively better off than families who must attend school in the neighboring big city from which many had moved. Contacts with school officials provided parents with another reason for satisfaction, in that "squeaky wheel" requests were often granted. Parents of special needs students voiced appreciation for the personal contacts made at meetings with special needs teachers and counselors, where they were met with a sympathetic ear. Another reason for parental satisfaction is that many parents harbor few *academic* expectations for schools. Social and athletic success as well as self-esteem were considered priorities by many parents. While the vast majority of students were not academic stars, parents accepted as given the competetive nature of schooling, and they accommodated themselves to this reality.

Parents also accept as given the status differential between parents and teachers. Fully six parents used the phrase "I'm not a teacher" to describe their inability to express concerns or to make suggestions. Even those parents who consider themselves equal or superior in social status to teachers perceive teachers as holding the power to wreak retribution, in the form of unfavorable treatment, on children. Parents were also put in an unequal position vis-a-vis teachers by their lack of knowledge of many school policies and practices. This lack of knowledge put many parents on the defensive.

Summary and Discussion

There were clear differences between parents and teachers in their views both on the current Hillside curriculum and in their views of an "ideal." Teachers preferred the emphasis on literature in the traditional model, while parents preferred a practically oriented curriculum with an emphasis on mastery of communications skills. Although there was a "debate" in the department over curriculum content and, especially, teaching methods, teachers continued to teach the traditional curriculum. They acknowledged an understanding of alternative pedagogies, but their approaches to the design of a hypothetical "ideal" were idiosyncratic. There was no evidence that the discussion over teaching methods which had been instituted by the department head had produced a consensus among department members. Their suspicions that the current curriculum was not congruent with community values was frustrating and somewhat depressing to several teachers, but they did not express a desire to modify the curriculum.

Teachers' views of high school English seemed shaped by their own experiences with college classes, where academicians distinguish between fiction and non-fiction, privileging fiction as "literature" and nonfiction as "reading" (Scholes, 1985). It is not surprising that Hillside English teachers, trained as literary critics, view "explaining" the text as a diversion, it clearly is not interpretation, so it must be "reading," and the job of teaching that subject, they imply, belongs to someone else. Indeed, universities have recently come under attack as exerting a stranglehold on the lower schools by foisting on students a decontextualized education that inhibits real learning (Clinchy, 1994). To

teachers, however, the college seminar is the quintessential intellectual community where the life of the mind is celebrated, and worries over practical skills are few

Some high school students live up to teachers' ideals These are the honors students who are bright, willing, if not eager, to learn With them teachers are able to engage in intellectual work, fulfilling their own needs for intellectual stimulation The "ideal" student commits to hard work, intellectual engagement, and nonmaterial values, looking very much like teachers' views of themselves

Teachers seem disappointed with many of the students in the regular college preparatory classes They place more emphasis on the word "college" and less on the "preparatory," blaming students and their parents for what teachers judge as poor ability and motivation to succeed at the curriculum in place Thus, they judge many college prep students as misplaced in the college prep curriculum, and they believe that many college prep students will not succeed in college Teachers are genuinely puzzled by what their goals should be for students who they believe are deficient in the ability to read the classics and write correctly They seem to have little understanding of how to upgrade reading skills and they are, in some cases, unwilling to focus much class time on the grammar skills they think students ought to have mastered before coming to high school To teachers, the ideal curriculum is one which enables them to teach "ideal" students--students who share their love of literature For those students who do not, teachers imply that they would feel more intellectually honest teaching English courses which are focused on skill development and practical English, but they feel constrained by the "college prep" designation in the course catalogue and the college aspirations of their students' families

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While teachers seem to share the view that general students are properly placed, in that they are not subjected to a curriculum that is too demanding for them, teachers do not necessarily focus on upgrading students' skills. They view students' lack of motivation as a major obstacle, and so they focus on engaging activities in the hope, rather than the assurance, that students will improve their reading and writing.

Although teachers view themselves as "experts," they voice many doubts about their ability to meet the demands of the public for higher standards, the department head for alternative pedagogy, and their own desires to motivate and engage resistant students. What is also notable is teachers' lack of confidence about teaching some of the basic skills, as they feel ensuring mastery for all students is not possible. This last, seems, in some ways, the "dirty secret" of educators, who profess that "all children can learn" while harboring the belief, often with a feeling of guilt, that many will *not*.

Still, teachers value their autonomy. They seem to model themselves after college professors or medical professionals, who, until recently, have been relatively inured to demands for accountability from outside their respective communities. At Hillside, as in many university departments, there are different approaches to the subject discipline, and teachers do not feel that they have to conform to a departmental consensus. In fact, Hillside teachers view the department head as no more authoritative than others in his curriculum preferences, and they feel free to teach in contradiction to his views about appropriate pedagogy.

One of the problems, of course, is that there is not a sufficient research base in the field of English teaching to indicate that a particular method is superior to others. In the absence of research support, teachers who wish to modify their practices must marshall a convincing rationale that a new method is better than an old one. That is difficult to do without serious consideration of ways to evaluate both old and new methods.

Parents view English almost entirely as a practical subject, confirming teachers' suspicions. Since they believe that English should teach communications skills of reading, writing, and, somewhat surprisingly, speaking, they are critical of teachers who do not focus on these skills. Parents want their children to master the ability to read, write, and speak much as they might wish them to master multiplication tables or the ability to drive a car. Like teachers, parents do not have particular ideas about how to improve these skills, other than the assignment of "more" reading and writing homework, but they viewed positively the "reteaching" aspect of the mastery curriculum scenario.

Somewhat paradoxically, although parents want teachers to assign "more homework" and uphold higher standards of correctness, they also place a premium on their children's enjoyment of school. While teachers prefer whole-class instructional methods, parents are sympathetic to small group instruction, believing that students are more easily motivated by peer interaction.

Just as there was no consensus among teachers for an "ideal" curriculum, there was a lack of consensus among parents, although there was near unanimity on the *rejection* of the literary heritage curriculum in place. This poses two problems. The first

problem is that, since parents' preferences differ, it might be difficult to replace the existing curriculum with one that meets with general agreement. The second is that a rejection of the literary heritage is, in many ways, a rejection of the very being of English teachers, a rejection of what gives meaning to their lives. Teachers already suspect that parents do not share their values, and the suspicion itself has been, at the very least, discouraging. What is not known is whether these differences are irreconcilable.

One of the disturbing aspects of this study is that, despite recent reform efforts advocating restructuring to become responsive to communities, teachers and parents cannot envision a process wherein this might occur. Teachers understand that, as employees of the School Committee, they are required to follow its policies. At the same time, since they have traditionally been autonomous with respect to teaching methods, they do not believe that parents should enter into a discussion about classroom methods. Parents, also believing that it is the elected School Committee members who are their representatives in educational matters, do not see a role for themselves in curriculum decisions. Knowing that the School Committee is the site of hotly contested battles, parents view the political process as undpredictable, governed by majority rule, and, as such, subject to potential loss of privilege by those members of the community on the losing side. Parents more easily understand the familiar role of consumer, choosing when choices are available, negotiating for privileges on an individual basis, but eschewing collective action.

A Need for Dialogue

In his book *The World We Created at Hamilton High*, Gerald Grant discusses the authority which school officials command as resting on the consent of the community. This consent can be either active or passive. Parents give active consent when there are strong bonds of shared values between parents and teachers; often there is an element of choice involved, as when parents choose a private school for their children. At Hillside, however, like most public schools, consent is passive and bonds are weak. Grant's description of the typical relationship between school and community seems relevant at Hillside:

> There is weak agreement with the general purposes of the school, but cooperation is minimal and trust is low. The school may be a fcility where one negotiates better teachers or a different program for one's child, but not a community that evokes active participaton or positive identification. The dominant attitudes of families are benign skepticism combined with intelligent consumerism (Grant, 1988, p. 133).

Strike (1993) has proposed another model, one that describes the formation of a deliberative community established by consent of a group of parents and educators with (presumably) similar values but which achieves consensus through "discursive forums." But this model cannot be applied after-the-fact to Hillside, presenting the classic "what can be done on Monday" question.

I propose, however, that initiating a dialogue between teachers and parents can help bridge the gap between home and school and, perhaps, at least an operational consensus about the purpose (or purposes) for the subject of high school English. It may

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mean that teachers communicate in a convincing way the importance of humanist values It may mean that parents may convince teachers that pragmatic, near-term goals are critical Either or both groups may, in the process of deliberation, examine their preliminary assumptions, imagined consequences and existing data to arrive at, perhaps, a new goal which is more satisfying than either the diffuse humanist goals of teachers or the more narrowly focused goals of parents

First, it is important for Hillside educators to address the knowledge gap between home and school If teachers, for example, were to articulate their personal goals to the entire community, parents would have a clearer idea of teachers' values This can be accomplished during the regular parents nights, but teachers can use other venues as well, such as articles in the local newspaper, school newsletters and parent handbook Curriculum content, particularly homework requirements, could be made available to parents by handing them a syllabus during the back-to-school nights Faculty might even establish voice-mail or E-mail services for both parents and students to use The principal and other administrators could also provide to each family clear information about parental prerogatives in choosing courses and curriculum levels English teachers might even take their cue from teachers of other "impractical" subjects, such as art, music and drama, by instituting exhibitions and performances of students' writing They might also involve parents in literary activities, leading book-club discussions of works students are reading as part of the curriculum

Teachers should also address their own (and the professions's) lack of knowledge about the effects of various instructional practices They should not be afraid to admit

what they (and other "authorities") do not know about student learning. They can explore the literature, establish study groups, and enlist parents in helping them gather information on targetted problems. They might, for example, ask parents to survey Hillside graduates to determine how well they feel they are prepared to meet the demands of colleges and careers.

Finally, teachers (and all educators, including those in universities) should use their own formidable language skills to address head-on the criticisms in the media and pronouncements of those in the bully pulpit. Silence on matters of value and practice undermines the very educational goals that undergird education for a democratic society. If educators do not activate their own citizenship, their students will be left without powerful models of what it means to be a participant in democratic society.

Parents, too, have a responsibility to engage in active citizenship. They can also take an active role in disseminating information. They might wish to establish official networks as alternatives to the current less-than-satisfactory "grapevine." Parents might institute "parent-to-parent" nights during which they can share problems and strategies for dealing with homework, college planning, and extracurricular issues. They can lobby for businesses to provide time for parents to attend school or funds for parents and teachers to work together on educational activities. And they can make time for the work that needs to be done to live in a responsive community.

With a climate of active involvement established through open communication and working relationships between parents and teachers, the process of deliberation over curriculum goals and practices will, perhaps, be free of suspicion. In a spirit of optimism,

as they begin to enact the future, adults can, in fact, model for young people ways for individuals to think and act in a democratic society, a society that may not yet truly exist, but the one that our children deserve

APPENDIX

Curriculum Scenarios

Scenario 1

The goal of this course is to introduce students to their literary heritage. Students will be asked to read widely acclaimed works such as A Tale of Two Cities, Macbeth, Huckleberry Finn, and The Scarlet Letter. They will also be introduced to the techniques of literary analysis, such as determining themes and examining the motivations of characters. For written composition students will be taught to write logically by formulating thesis statements or topic sentences and supporting them with evidence.

The teaching techniques used will include lectures and class discussions led by the teacher, who asks pertinent questions about the works students have read. For those students who have difficulty understanding the literary works, class discussion will emphasize the action of the plot. In those classes where students understand the plot, discussion will focus on the meaning of the work and the techniques the author has used to create an effect. The teacher will assign formal compositions on various topics and will correct students' written work for grammar, spelling and punctuation errors as well as logical presentation of ideas.

Students will be graded by their marks on quizzes and tests. Their essays will be graded in relation to those of other students in the class.

Scenario 2

The goal of this course is to provide opportunities for the developing language abilities of students. Students will be assigned literature which is appealing to adolescents, much of it written by contemporary authors, and they will be encouraged to connect what they read in class to their personal lives. In addition, students will have the opportunity to choose many of the works which they will read. They will write frequent informal reactions to what they have read as well as what they have experienced in their lives. Some of these works will be revised into formal essays, but students will also have the opportunity to write dialogues, stories and poems.

The teaching techniques will include whole-class and small-group discussions of literature. The writing component of the curriculum will be conducted as a workshop, with students working on planning, writing, revising and editing in class. Students will learn to collaborate with each other as well as seek advice from their teachers. They will have the opportunity to share their writing by reading their work to each other and publishing their writing in classroom magazines.

Students will evaluate their own work periodically, but teachers will grade students on class performance and a portfolio of written work which will be examined each marking period.

Scenario 3

The goal of this course is to teach the basic skills of reading and writing. Students will read both classic and contemporary literature as well as newspapers and magazines, and they will concentrate on expanding their reading vocabulary. They will learn various

forms of writing which are done in school, such as essays and reports, but they will also be taught practical writing such as memos and business letters. Students will also practice such skills as spelling and punctuation so that they will learn to write correctly.

The teaching techniques will include class discussion of reading material, with the teacher questioning students to see whether they have comprehended it. The teacher will directly teach vocabulary and writing skills to students, who will practice the material. The teacher will frequently assess whether students have mastered the material and reteach concepts if necessary.

The teacher will evaluate whether students have mastered the material by oral or written quizzes. If testing indicates that students still need help in mastering a skill or learning important information, students can obtain help from fellow students or the teacher. Students who do not receive satisfactory grades will be given extra opportunities to master the material and improve their grades.

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